

# Five Minutes with Chantal Mouffe: “Most countries in Europe are in a post-political situation”

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16/09/2013

*Is there a fundamental lack of choice between centre-left and centre-right parties in European party systems? The EUROPP team spoke to **Chantal Mouffe** on her theory of ‘post-politics’, the need for political parties to offer a real alternative on European integration, and whether populism can have a positive effect on European democracy.*



## **You’ve written extensively about ‘post-politics’. Do you think that Europe is in a post-political situation?**

Well I would certainly say that most countries in Europe are in a post-political situation. I developed this idea of post-politics to basically refer to the representative system in European countries, and the fact that there has been the establishment of what I call a ‘consensus at the centre’ between the centre-right and centre-left around the idea that there is no alternative to neo-liberal globalisation.

For me, democracy requires citizens to be given a genuine choice when they go to vote, and this choice must offer a real alternative to the existing order. This is not possible anymore because the centre-left parties do not offer anything which is a genuine alternative to neo-liberal globalisation. We have seen that very much in Britain, with Tony Blair and New Labour, who came to power and did not question the basis of the agenda which had been established by Margaret Thatcher, but simply decided to manage it a bit more humanely.

The same thing exists in other countries. For instance, in France at the moment we have a socialist government, but François Hollande is not really doing anything which is different from Sarkozy. The same thing happened in Spain with Zapatero. So this is basically what I call ‘post-political’: the fact that there is no real alternative, there is no choice given to citizens. And I don’t think that this is something which is good for democracy.

Of course some people have been arguing that it *is* good for democracy, this blurring of the line between left and right, because democracy is supposedly more ‘mature’. I disagree with this. For instance in my book, *On the Political*, I’ve tried to explain the development of right-wing populist parties as a reaction to the lack of choice which is given to citizens. Right-wing populist parties are, in many countries, the only parties who argue that there is a real alternative. Now the alternative that they propose is unacceptable, would not work economically, and on top of that often reflects some form of xenophobia, but they give the possibility of mobilising passion toward change.

Politics is, of course, to do with interests and moral concern, but there is also a dimension related to ‘passion’: the need for people to identify with a project. And what I call post-political is precisely the lack of this passion and identification.

## **Should Europe be wary of populism, or can it have a positive effect on democracy?**

First I would say that the crisis in Europe is sometimes perceived as being a ‘crisis of the European project’. I don’t think that’s the case: I think it’s actually a crisis of the *neo-liberal* incarnation of the European project. The problem is that for many people the European Union is so closely identified with this neo-liberal incarnation that they believe there is no possibility to transform it into something else. Europe *is* neo-liberalism for these people.

On the other side, there are those people who believe that any critique of the current European project is fundamentally anti-European. There no longer seems to be any space for those who are not against Europe, but who simply want a different type of European integration. Now right-wing populist parties are not really offering an

alternative either, they're only interested in saying that they don't want the European Union. But the lack of debate and the inability of people to voice alternatives without being labelled 'anti-European' strengthens the support for these right-wing populist parties, who simply want to get rid of European integration altogether.

I think it's really problematic to use populism as a solely negative term. In my view, there is a necessary populist dimension to democracy. Democracy is a construction of a demos, and populism – leaving aside all of the interpretations which warn of the manipulation of the masses and the threat posed by demagogic leaders – is a part of the creation of a people. Democracy is about defining a popular will: what Gramsci called the formation of a collective will. But of course there are different ways in which a 'people' can be constructed. This is why we have right-wing forms of populism and left-wing forms of populism.

One theory I have developed is that political identity is based on the idea of 'we' as opposed to 'them'. If you are to construct a people then it is necessary to determine who 'they' are. In the case of right-wing populism this is usually immigrants, or Muslims, or foreigners. But this is not the only way to construct a people. If we consider the [Front de Gauche](#) in France, for instance, they are clearly a left-wing movement, but they have also been accused of being populist. In a sense this is absolutely correct, because they want to oppose the discourse of the Front National by constructing another people. This is a people where Muslims and immigrants are not excluded, but instead the chief adversaries are the forces of neo-liberal globalisation. So while both the Front de Gauche and the Front National are populist movements, there is a very big difference between the types of people they have attempted to construct.

Another example of left-wing populism – a far more successful one – is SYRIZA in Greece, who came very close to winning the elections in 2012. So we are now seeing the emergence of a new kind of left-wing populism across Europe, and for me this is an extremely positive development. It is one way in which we can begin to break the consensus of the centre and start considering real alternatives to neo-liberal globalisation.

**So far we've discussed national politics, but do you think that developments at the European level, such as the actions of the European Commission and MEPs in the European Parliament, have a positive or negative effect on debates over European integration?**

I believe, definitively, that they have a similarly negative effect to the centrist parties at the national level. The European institutions do not allow for a real political debate. The European Union needs to be politicised: at present it's a kind of bureaucratic, non-political environment which doesn't allow for a real debate over the direction of the integration process.

That also has consequences for the national level, because the centrist parties have a convenient excuse to avoid changing their policies. They claim that they would like to pursue different policies, but that Brussels will not allow it. It's an excuse for denying citizens a real debate about organising things differently. However this is not set in stone. There will be a possibility to have real debates about left-wing and right-wing alternatives for Europe. If elections to the European Parliament were contested along genuine right-wing and left-wing lines, with real alternatives offered to voters, it would increase the interest of citizens in the European Union. Europe should, after all, be what its citizens want it to be.

**Are technocratic governments simply the logical conclusion to the kind of post-political Europe you've described?**

Certainly I agree with the ideas of people such as [Colin Crouch](#), who argue that we are living in a 'post-democratic' situation. Our societies still call themselves democratic, but what does democracy mean in the present circumstances? The most obvious case is of course when they decide to completely overrule democratic processes through parliament and put in place a technocratic government. What does it mean to call this kind of society democratic?

This is definitely a real trend, but it's a trend that will undermine democracy even further. We seem to believe that it's

now possible to do away with democracy altogether. It leads to the idea that we might be able to run things better if we simply removed any democratic constraints and implemented some form of bureaucracy. The name 'democratic' might remain in these cases, but we cannot genuinely see these countries as democracies any more.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## **About the author**

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